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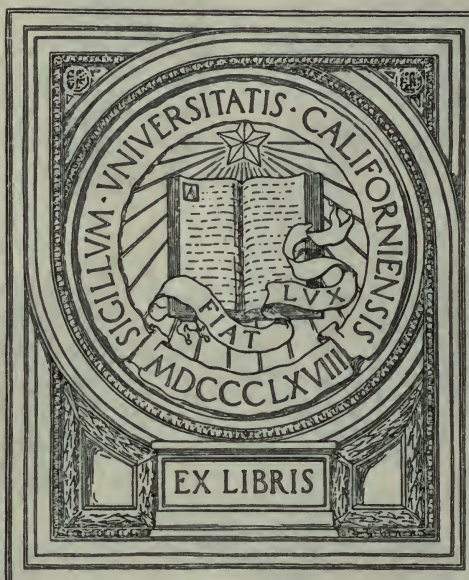

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A NIRVANA TRILOGY:

THREE ESSAYS

On the Career and the Literary Labours of

JAMES THOMSON,

Author of "The City of Dreadful Night."

BY

WILLIAM MACCALL.

I. THE LAUREATE OF PESSIMISM.
II. THE MAN AND THE ARTIST.
III. THE ESSAYIST AND THE CRITIC.

LONDON:
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PROLOGUE.

THE first of these essays appeared in the *Republican*, edited by Mr. George Standring; the second and the third in the *Secular Review*, edited by Mr. William Stewart Ross. Instead of essays, I might call them threnodies, for they are cries of lamentation more than calm, judicial pronouncements.

To bring the Buddhist Nirvana and the Greek Trilogy together may seem an unnatural and even preposterous combination. But the drama of James Thomson's existence was threefold: that of the man, that of the poet, that of the mere literary labourer—the saddest in some respects of the three, though apparently the least sad. Beyond and above the drama, however, was the vision, was the void of something neither life nor death—something far more deep and awful than that which men vaguely and helplessly call mystery. With weird, miraculous instinct, the old Indian religions and philosophies pierced to this something; but unable to give it a name or to portray its attributes, they clothed it in a gorgeous garment of myth and poetry. Buddhism went profounder, far profounder, but ended by vulgarising what it began by adoring. From remotest ages the tragedy of the universe had been seen and felt; but what had not been felt or seen was that the universe itself is a tragedy; that not merely is existence cursed with evil, but that existence itself is an evil. We cannot escape from

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the evil, because we cannot annihilate the universe; we cannot even annihilate ourselves. Besides, were we to throw away the burden and the despair of our own life, we know that we should leave behind the scene and the source of unspeakable misery. And to a noble soul, more wounded by the spectacle than by the experience of wretchedness, how awful is the thought that the sin and the sorrow are eternal, and that what has ever been must ever be! In Nirvana, through the path of transmigration, he finds solace and peace, not for himself alone, but for all creatures. Here the degrading idea of enjoyment so prominent in nearly all theological systems has no place; there is simply the dream of a higher and higher perfection. I have attempted to complete Ideal Buddhism and to enrich its Nirvana apocalypse by the doctrine of Panontism, including as development the polarisation of instinct. Universal Being unconsciously, impulsively, irresistibly seeks a home and a country. It bursts into consciousness, but encounters there only madness and pain. Forthwith it longs and desperately strives to return to unconsciousness. But all it can achieve is to give to countless births the bounty and the balm of sleep. The sleep of creatures is the imperfect unconsciousness of Universal Being. How gladly would Universal Being itself slumber! Yet in the coming eternities and immensities there is for Universal Being and for its essential principle called by man God a Nirvana as well as for the creatures; a state alike removed from consciousness and unconsciousness, from life and from death; a slumberous ecstasy.

The ethical significance of Nirvana was in James Thomson's whole existence; the metaphysical suggestiveness of Nirvana he did not see. It was hidden from him by his

training and by the whole course of his destiny. Nevertheless, he was one of Nirvana's grandest apostles, and as such should he be honoured and revered, even if his literary renown were to vanish like a vapour. Yet to his literary renown I am not indifferent. Exceedingly should I rejoice if any word of mine helped to extend it. For, though he cared little enough for fame, he was one of the honest, earnest toilers in the vast literary fields of whom, in these days of follicularian pretentiousness, there are so few. Furthermore should I rejoice if I induced some one competent for the task, and taking a sympathetic interest in James Thomson, to become his biographer. The letters of James Thomson were as admirable as his poems; and there must be many in the hands of his friends which would greatly enrich a biography. His friends lovingly recall the charm of his conversation, and his published letters would be his conversation with all the world.

WILLIAM MACCALL.

December, 1886.

A NIRVANA TRILOGY.

I.

THE LAUREATE OF PESSIMISM.

A DOZEN years ago or more I called at the office of Mr. Charles Bradlaugh, who introduced me to a gentleman acting at the time as his clerk. The clerk proved to be James Thomson, in whose writings I had taken an interest without knowing anything of his career except that he had been, like me and Mr. Bradlaugh, a dragoon. He and I exchanged a few hurried but cordial words. This was our first, our last, our only meeting. I often yearned to clasp the hand of my gifted countryman again; but the delight was denied me. In the summer of 1874 James Thomson, of his own accord, commenced a correspondence with me. He was induced to do so from discovering that with a Scottish family living in London, and which had been very kind to him in his boyhood, I had long been intimate. From the beginning of October, 1833, until the beginning of October, 1834, I was Unitarian Minister at Greenock. After I left Greenock a lady that had been a member of my congregation married a gentleman who settled in London, prospered, and retired to the neighbourhood of the great city. This gentleman and this lady are still living. It was at their house, and as the playmate of their children, that James Thomson spent his happiest days. Those days he seemed in his letters to me never tired of recalling. I often pressed him to renew his relations with the hospitable friends of his childhood, who were as willing as in the past to welcome him. But his constitutional shyness, or some other cause, hindered him from gratifying a desire which evidently stirred his being very deeply.

James Thomson's letters to me were frank, fresh, courageous, perfectly unaffected. They had the ease, the pungency, the artistic finish by which all his prose writings are characterised. If, as some say, his moral being had suffered a tragical wrench, his beautiful intellectual symmetry was not thereby affected. I am always provoked to fiercest anger when the Pharisees sit in judgment on the noble souls of whom this wretched earth of ours is not worthy. There was a grim sincerity in James Thomson: no affectations of any kind. It is a terrible thing to be born artist and battler too. Perchance the first so born was Dante; and he has had numerous children. James Thomson was one of them. Thomson had many brothers: Leopardi was his dearest brother. With instinctive Dantesque logic, James Thomson saw that the sins and sorrows of the community are the sins and sorrows of the universe. Hence his worship of Death, and his Promethean defiance of the gods. His fate vindicated his philosophy. Just when his powers were ripening, just when he was giving promise of sublimest achievement, just when his genius was beginning to be recognised and admired, he was struck down.

It is a curious fact that the first Scottish James Thomson and the second Scottish James Thomson both died in their forty-eighth year. This is the only point of resemblance; for the first James Thomson, the bard of the "Seasons," sojourned all through life in his own Castle of Indolence. On the contrary, the second James Thomson dwelt in the universe as if it had been an Inquisition. In him and around him instruments of torture were multiplied. Yet, when at the end of February I received my last letter from him, he appeared to have escaped for a time from the dungeons and despairs of the Inquisition, and to be gladdened for an instant by the sun. He was living at some hospitable abode in Leicestershire, seemed to be almost hopeful and happy, and half ashamed to be, for the first time since boyhood, happy and hopeful. His death on June 3rd, 1882, was a great surprise and a great sorrow to me, though I doubt not that he entered Nirvana, his true home, with eager and ecstatic feet.

Born on November 23rd, 1834, at Port Glasgow, James Thomson was, like another of my correspondents, John Sterling, a child of the Clyde; and to me, as a native of

Largs and a child of the Clyde, they were both the more interesting on that account. It was the doom of all the three to be heretics, though in very different fashions. It was the doom of all the three to labour in fragmentary and fruitless modes. Of Sterling I have spoken long ago, when publishing his letters to me. Of myself I need not now speak. Of James Thomson I have little to utter, except my regard and regret. Every man is compacted of complicated and conflicting elements; every man, therefore, is an enigma, not merely to others, but to himself. The more complicated and conflicting the elements, the more of course there is of external inconsistency. Yet how usual it is to take external consistency as sole and supreme test of character!

What must strike us all as the chief thing in James Thomson is his pessimism; and in calling him the Laureate of Pessimism I indicate his literary aspiration and the moral significance of his life. To others before him pessimism was a sentiment or a system; to James Thomson it was a passion—a passion bursting not into wild cries, but into most melodious speech. Pessimism needs no justification. We seek and we find in the universe that which corresponds to our own nature. If we are ourselves consummately miserable, we are irresistibly attracted by the spectacle of misery, and we are driven to believe either that there is no God, or that he is a malignant monster, or that he is impelled to create and to destroy by instinctive necessity. What is history? A long tragedy. Have we any reason to believe that human destiny can ever essentially change, or that the future can be brighter and better than the past? With increasing knowledge has there not always been increasing pain? Must we not hate or despise man when we do not pity him? What but lies are the words of the theologians? And what but sophistries and pedantries are the words of the sages? The sorrows of the community, the woes of humanity, are mirrored in our own afflictions; and the more we feel the glory of the universe the more we are inclined to contrast with it wretchedness and wrong, the wounds that can never be healed, the pangs that can never be soothed, the injustice that can never be overthrown. Carlyle, who outgrew not his Calvinistic culture, clung to the savage Jehovah of the Hebrews: a God half-gloomy pedagogue, half-ferocious executioner; a God smiting with-

out mercy the workers of iniquity. This stern but just God is a figment to which nothing in reality corresponds; and still remoter from reality is the God of such optimists as Leibnitz.

All of us who have to battle as reformers and to suffer as martyrs have a double vocation: to assail what is false in human systems, corrupt and cruel in human institutions, and to protest against the monstrosities, the murders, the madnesses, with which the universe abounds. Others may have fulfilled the first part of the vocation more valiantly and victoriously than James Thomson. None ever fulfilled the second part so intensely, so exuberantly, or with such magnificent audacity. Yet he struck no rash, no random blows. For years he had been a soldier, and in learning obedience to an external discipline he had, at the same time, learned submission to an internal rule. His onsets have all a rhythmical clangour. But, in the pauses of the march, and of the music, we hear a still small voice saying unto us that he is alone in the universe, and that he longs to die. That his pessimism was morbid cannot be denied. But when the community is itself one huge disease, one vast leprosy, where is health to be found? Religion should arise as a healer and a helper. Yet how can religion be a physician and a sustainer when itself foul and feeble from every imaginable plague? The makers of systems in our own days, such as Comte, seem determined to build not only with the stones of sepulchres, but with the bones of the dead, and in the midst of multitudes stricken with the pestilence. Thomson's contempt for new systems was more bitter than his hatred of expiring theologies. He knew that nothing could save the theologies, but that new systems would cover the earth with swarms of delusions, hindering the renovation of man's moral and spiritual life.

It is as a martyr more than as a poet that James Thomson should be honoured, Laureate of Pessimism though he was. The demon of hypochondriasis had laid hold upon him at an early date. From that demon his most tragical pangs came. His life of poverty and pain and disenchantment and pessimistic despair he could have born with the courage of a Spartan, the silence of a Stoic, and, I may add, with the reserve and undemonstrativeness of a Scotsman. But to sink into an abyss far ghastlier than Dante's Hell, and to

have no change except a change of torments, and to have dreads more awful than the torments, was a doom which could be neither confessed nor consoled, and which only a sudden poetical gleam from time to time disclosed. It is a fallacy to believe that it is men constitutionally sombre, habitually sad, who are the supreme sufferers. They are as little oppressed by the gloom as the inhabitant of the Arctic region is by the cold and leaden atmosphere. The supreme sufferers are the men who have a profound relish of existence. Evermore they have to go forth into the desert, after plucking the flowers and the fruits of Paradise. Standing on the mountain peak, and gazing into the sunny infinite, they are, unwarned, enveloped in the snowstorm or smitten by the thunderbolt.

It is said that James Thomson was the most charming of companions, playful and witty and enjoying; and doubtless no one could be more social and sympathetic. But the moment he was alone the demon of hypochondriasis and all kindred and attendant demons seized him and tore and crushed him in the darkness of his insane phantasy. To him was allotted just so much pleasure as tempted him to live on. There are many in these days who are tortured as he was tortured, but who have not his solaces, few and transient as they were. In our pharisaical community, which is always canting loathsomely or idiotically about religion, but which has not a particle of religious life, there are silent saints, unregarded martyrs, not a few. They tread with weary and bleeding feet their Gethsemane, and do not shrink from, but long for their Calvary, because it is to bring them deliverance. It is they to whom, though he had never seen their faces, James Thomson appealed. And it is they from whom the redemption of the world is to come, if the world is to be redeemed at all.

In my own very imperfect way I have proclaimed Individuality and the Insurrection of the Individual. But that Individuality and that Insurrection have the Eternal Christ behind and the Eternal Prometheus before. The Laureate of Pessimism, though a son of Dante, was, moreover, a soldier of the Eternal Prometheus. Others have spoken, perchance others are better entitled to speak, of Thomson's exquisite literary skill. Of him as the soldier of the Eternal Prometheus no one has so clearly the right and the duty to speak

as I have. Yea, my brother! Thou wast in sundry respects braver than I; and in some things thou didst suffer more than I; but how much my aspirations, my despairs, my whole destiny resemble thine! To the extent that thou wast more a literary artist than I, was thou less a sufferer; for art is always to the artist a delight. Thou, a martyr, sleepest beside the grave of a martyr. Austin Holyoake had not thine anguish of imagination, had a solid grasp of reality; but he was true and brave, and loving in word and deed like thee. They who say that in this world everything breaks, everything passes, everything is effaced, everything is replaced, are not wholly wrong. But of you who can take the place, ye two valiant ones, whose aspirations were so noble and whose life was so pure?

July, 1882.

II.

THE MAN AND THE ARTIST.*

It is unfortunate for the reputation of James Thomson that he should chiefly have been spoken of as a Freethinker. A bigot once asked me what name I assumed to distinguish myself from orthodox believers. I replied that, when a man turns heretic, he has so many names given him that he does not need to take any. Freethinker I have certainly never called myself: I have felt, I have known, that all thought is free—the thought of the most abject, superstitious slave as well as of the boldest negationist. Moreover, thought comes to me because I exist, not existence because I think. What I am is the sum of my activities; my chief characteristic is that I am a man. I claim as brothers not the thinkers, for I am a thoughtless creature—the verdict upon me by my father and mother, confirmed by my whole career—but the heroes, the men who have made the noblest, the divinest use of their manhood. I have no ambition to stand apart from my fellows and boastfully to proclaim that I am wiser than they: it would be far easier for me to prove to them—if, indeed, they needed any proof—that I am an incomparable fool. It is my free, spontaneous, natural life in the universe that alone concerns me; and, as I have said a thousand times, I make war on false doctrines no further than they impede my march. Eccentricity has no charms for me—above all, intellectual eccentricity. On the contrary, I seek the centre—strive towards the centre. But the mortals who vaunt of being Freethinkers deem intellectual singularity a supreme merit. Our bond, how-

* A Voice From the Nile, and Other Poems. By the late James Thomson. With a Memoir of the Author, by Bertram Dobell. (London: Reeves & Turner, 196. Strand.) 1884.

ever, with our fellows is an eminently human bond, and is little affected by intellectual conditions. As a social being, I surrender myself to the flow of emotion, to the glow of phantasy. Compared herewith, all the creeds, heterodox or orthodox, sink into insignificance. In a certain sense, the great Greek dramatists might be designated Freethinkers, for the atmosphere of liberty was indispensable to their majestic creations. And, in the same sense, Socrates was a Freethinker, and Plato and Lucretius and Cicero. But the Greek and Roman poets and philosophers and orators would have scorned to be named Freethinkers in the modern sense of the word. On the human basis was raised the sublime structure of the patriotic and the ethical. Indeed, to view, to parade, Freethinking as a thing apart is a pitiful pedantry. You may, if you like, represent Shakespeare as a Freethinker; for, by humanising the heart, he has done more to liberalise the mind of England than all the champions of Freethought. In kindred fashion, Molière was far more grandly than Voltaire the emancipator of the French soul. Even Voltaire himself was indebted for his vast empire as an emancipationist, not to his satirical and polemical, but to his purely literary, productions. His assaults on Christianity were appropriations and adaptations more or less skilful from the works of the English Deists. Those who have gone patiently and conscientiously through the whole utterances of this witty and brilliant writer must confess that he is often dull, especially where we might expect to find him for ever sparkling—in his correspondence. It was his exclusively literary productions that took the intellect of France, the intellect of Europe, captive. By incomparable mockery, Voltaire, in his "Candide," dethroned Leibnitzian optimism and every imaginable theodicæa; nevertheless, the satirical treatment and the satirical purpose are subordinated to the human interest.

Indeed, Freethought is a manifest misnomer applied to the profound spiritual movement of the eighteenth century. This century was eminently the period of Humanism, and of this Humanism the high priest was Rousseau. Those in that age whom we familiarly but erroneously call Freethinkers looked with no favour on the intellectual emancipation of the multitude; for they regarded doubt as an intellectual monopoly, scorn as an intellectual luxury. In

truth, the humanism of the eighteenth corresponded to, and was in a large measure the outcome of, the Renaissance of the fifteenth century. Protestantism thwarted, marred, the Renaissance. The reign of dogmatism began, and the Bible was exalted into a fetich.

But just when the Middle Ages came to an end, and the peculiar life of the Middle Ages perished, a new world was revealed to the enthusiasm and enterprise of mankind. Catholic unity was completely, was irreparably broken; but a new unity arose—the unity of scientific speculation, of commercial daring, of colonial conquest. That unity is still to the nations what Catholic unity was to them in the mediæval period.

But man's primordial yearnings are unchangeable, inextinguishable; and this shows the folly and the falsehood of sociology and of its jargon about developments. Religion, dethroned from its domain of rite and of symbol, found compensating empire in music, in painting, and in poetry. It was natural that, when men were rushing to new worlds across the waves, and astronomy was miraculously unveiling new worlds in the heavens, the first modern philosophy worthy of the name should be predominantly realistic. Such was Baconianism. It is not the subtle Descartes, but the far more grandly and variously gifted Bacon, whom we must regard as the founder of modern philosophy. And it is through the unfoldings of Baconianism, and not through the impulse given by Italian thinkers in the sixteenth century, or by Cartesianism in the seventeenth, or by Protestantism, which really all through has been a hindrance rather than a help, that liberty of investigation has continued to be victorious.

The bold metaphysical visions of the last hundred years in Germany were inspired by the East and by ancient Greece, and had only an apparent originality. But after the French Revolution a fresh element came into play, or rather there was the fresh apocalypse of an element which goes back to the remotest times—the disharmony of man with himself, with the community, and with the universe. In the oldest traditions, in the oldest literatures, you find it. After troubling the German heart, interesting the German intellect, it found fantastic expression in Shelley—mad, passionate, sublime expression in Byron. It gave birth

to what has been called the Literature of Despair, which curiously ran beside that Literature of Joy of which Scott was the representative. But to describe Shelley and Byron as Freethinkers because they battled with the Fates and the Furies, and Zeus and inexorable Necessity, would be supremely ridiculous; and equally ridiculous would it be to describe Leopardi and Heine and James Thomson as Freethinkers. Belonging to a healthy age, Shelley and Byron were as healthy as the age itself. There was nothing morbid in their fiercest blasphemies, in their most daring denials. Appertaining to an unhealthy age, James Thomson was still more unhealthy than the age. The spiritual unhealthiness of Leopardi and Heine had little to do with the age, and was the result of bodily torment and prostration. Both of them had been born not many years after Byron and Shelley. It has been said of Leopardi that, since Pascal, there has been no example of so great an intelligence so cruelly oppressed by the infirmities of the body. And it is a curious point of likeness between the two illustrious sufferers that Pascal died just after, and Leopardi just before, completing the thirty-ninth year. Leopardi is one of the sublimest figures in history. Among the Sons of Death he occupies the foremost place. In Heine there was a large vein of ignobleness—so large, indeed, that his countrymen are ashamed of him, and prophesy that, except a few of his best lyrics, none of his productions can survive. It is odd that, while Heine is overrated in France, and still more overrated in England, there is a tendency in his country to scorn him as a somewhat heartless persifleur. Leopardi and Heine are the two men with whom James Thomson acknowledged most of spiritual kindredness. His conscious or unconscious brotherhood with Leopardi exalted Thomson; that with Heine dragged him down. It was the fraternity of sorrow—of the sorrow that sends its wail in response to the eternal moan of the universe—which brought Thomson near to Leopardi; it is what we may call his sympathetic intellectuality which made Heine his companion and counsellor. How much grander Thomson was when, with Leopardi, he lamented than when, with Heine, he scoffed and cursed! Because, in the one case, he was an actor in the eternal, the universal tragedy; in the other he varied buffoonery with malediction, from imitation, from reminis-

cence, from the desperate attempt to fling out of sight for a moment his misery.

Thomson was not naturally a mocker—had not naturally the faculties of a satirist. His humour is not opulent; his wit is forced. Of the delicate irony which may be named the fragrance of despair, and which all the Sons of Death possess, he was a consummate master. If it is wrong to give prominence to Thomson as a Freethinker in the narrow, pedantic, prosaic sectarian sense of the word, grievous harm is done to his memory by the republication of his satirical pieces, and by the extravagant laudations lavished on them by those who do not seem to know what the essence of true satire is; for satire, when not an overflow of geniality and animal spirits, as in Rabelais, must have the intensity of passion, as in Juvenal. Far nobler service to Thomson's abiding reputation has been done by Mr. Bertram Dobell in the gift to the world of a fresh volume of Thomson's poetry. Mr. Dobell's biography of Thomson is admirable. It is very modestly written; it is merciful, most tender to Thomson, without being disloyal to truth.

The year Thomson was born I, when Unitarian minister at Greenock, sometimes preached at Port Glasgow, which is two miles higher up the river Clyde than Greenock. Occasionally, since Thomson's death, a strange mystical questioning has throbbed in my heart: whether among the hearers of my perfervid harangues at Port Glasgow was a meek, sweet woman, who carried with her a divine treasure —the unborn poet. If she listened to my outbursts of youthful enthusiasm, did these enrich that life which was still hidden from the gaze of men, but which was destined to be a light to lighten the Gentiles? Everything in the universe is a mystery; and why on this one mystery should I not dwell and revere it as holy?

The volume for which we are indebted to Mr. Dobell contains some of Thomson's finest poems—for instance, "Insomnia." I approached the volume in no critical spirit, but rather with brotherly love and with that religious awe which we owe to all genius. To examine in detail the contents of the volume is not my present purpose. I doubt whether I have any fitness for minute, for analytical criticism; and I must content myself with recording the chief impressions that the volume made on my mind. First of

all, it struck me, and probably it has struck others, that the earliest of Thomson's poems manifest the same stylistic or artistic mastery as the latest. Herefrom it is obvious that, from the outset, Thomson had made style a special study. Probably his military training, his occupations as a military schoolmaster, had here a potent influence. The habit of submission to military discipline, and of obeying and enforcing military exactitude, made for Thomson order and symmetry the equivalents of the beautiful. Of course, there was the instinct of art; but the art gradually taught itself to be subject to military bondage and regulation. Take this fact in connection with the deplorable circumstance that Thomson's boyhood and youth were cheerless and repressed —that he had not the free, spontaneous life of those fated to be great poets; such as Shakespeare and Goethe and Scott. Thus it came to pass that the gifted poet Thomson was always transcended by Thomson the accomplished artist, except in the lofty pessimistic utterances, when the man was more than the poet, the poet more than the artist. Except in those pessimistic utterances also, Thomson, in his longer and more earnest poems, is vague and monotonous. There is a lack of passion and individuality. Herein Thomson is a striking contrast to his countryman Burns, who is all individuality and all passion. In Thomson's lighter poems, which are often very charming, not passion or individuality, but phantasy, plays the chief part. In poetry perfection of form is a good thing; but it is only richness of substance which can keep poetry alive from generation to generation. Now, in Thomson's poems the perfection of form is always admirable: when, however, we expect the brilliant hues and the sweet music to lead us to a noble banquet, the banquet is not set before us. Of many of Shelley's poems the same thing may be said.

I might greatly enlarge on the preceding rapid hints; but it is not necessary. They are intended for those who revere and love James Thomson, not for gainsayers; and they may explain why Thomson, though he has enthusiastic adorers, has not become popular, and may never gain popularity. Though he received no part of his education in learned academies, Thomson is as an author too academical. I might sum up in these words: it is his tragic doom as a man which makes the artist, James Thomson, interesting to

us; and it is because the artist is interesting to us that we clasp the poet to our breast.

Such men as James Thomson I never presume to judge as men. Each of them is what the Germans would call a heimathlos—a homeless one; a heimathlos in society, a heimathlos in immensity. They seek a home, and they find it not until Nirvana receives them into its merciful bosom.

That Thomson should have sought refuge from pain and gloom in intemperance we may lament; but why should we condemn? If Carlyle is to be pardoned for fighting against dyspepsia with tobacco, why should Thomson be anathematised for striving to vanguish hypochondriasis with strong drink? Why scourge as a crime what should be pitied as a disease? Let the Pharisees howl their idiotic and cruel howl; let them declare that Thomson's sin and misery and phrenzy sprang from his Scepticism. Of course, if he had believed in the Atonement, he would have worn the blue ribbon, married a rich deacon's daughter, and been unspeakably happy! The unanimous testimony of all his friends is that Thomson was pure, noble, loving, most loveable. But, moreover, I believe that, in his deepest nature, Thomson was religious—religious with a religion that Pharisees can never know or feel. In jest I have sometimes said that I was the only religious man ever born in Scotland. But what I said in jest I could easily prove to be the truth. I am proud, and have reason to be proud, of my country; for the grand battle which Scotland fought, and successfully fought, for its independence has no parallel in the history of the world. But I have long ceased to believe that my countrymen are a religious people. Alfred Maury, a French writer of great ability, has shown that the religious ideas of the Semitic race had the aridity and the sterility of the desert; that the Semitic race never got beyond, never rose higher than, a naked Monotheism. All thoughtful and impartial persons have arrived at the same conclusion. Now, the only real religion my countrymen have ever had is the heritage of superstitions they received from the Celts. My countrymen have never been Christians except in name. But they have taken as religion the arid and sterile faith which the Hebrews offered them, and in the grim Caledonian grasp the faith has grown harder

and sterner through the icy North wind blowing from the barren moorland. Now, from my earliest days I was stirred by mystical instincts, which yearned for, which sought, field and food, but in vain. In truth, I was an Oriental born in the North, and my dreams and darings were ever of a pilgrimage to the native region of my soul. After weary wanderings in Rationalistic wildernesses, I thought that I had found this region in what I was in the habit of calling poetic and passionate Pantheism. Going a step further, I, for want of a better designation, characterise my polymorphous and polychromatic faith as Mystical Panontism. Now, as a Mystical Panontist, and believing that the mysterious can only be represented by rite and symbol, only adored by sublime silence, must I not deem the theological system of Scotland more destitute of the true and rich religious elements than a ready-reckoner? If, after saying that I was the only religious man ever born in Scotland, I made an exception, it would be in favour of him whom I have named the Laureate of Pessimism. When he flung from him one article of his theological creed after another it was not doubt which was busy with him: he was travelling, like me, towards the Benares of his soul. This makes me the more regret that, by false friends, Thomson should have been exhibited to envenomed foes as a scoffer, a blasphemer, when verily, as poet, as man he was a priest of the Infinite. Lessing, that radiant 'and valiant athlete, said that to what he himself had uttered gymnastically—that is, polemically—he might not be always willing to give dogmatic recognition. Now, in this clear and forcible saying of one of the clearest, most robust, and resolute intellects, there is implied, or suggested, a profound truth. It is this: that we should estimate every man, not by his negative, but by his positive side, and that even his negative side is important and interesting only so far as it embosoms positive qualities. This is how I myself wish to be estimated, and it is how habitually I estimate others. It is how James Thomson ought to be judged, whose positive side was so much larger, so much more luminous, than his negative side. But here the talk of judgment has a dangerous resemblance to pedantry. Poor, wrung and weary heart, what matters it how we judge thee? From Homer downwards, have not all men proclaimed all

men to be frail and fugitive even as the leaves? As the leaves, we are fresh and comely for a season, and then we fade and fall, and are driven about by the winds till we mingle with the elements. Nothing seems immortal but the autocrator, the polycrator of the universe, and, half-tearfully, he laughs at our visions of immortality. Perchance he envies us the privilege of death; for it must be an awful thing to live on from eternity, and to behold woe, most tragic woe, wherever there are the hot pulses of life.

December, 1884.

III.

THE ESSAYIST AND THE CRITIC.*

THE pious and beautiful loyalty of Mr. Bertram Dobell to the memory of his gifted and unfortunate friend, James Thomson, is worthy of supreme praise. By the publication of the present volume I am induced and enabled to complete my discourses, which some of the malevolent may perchance call my rhapsodies, on a son of Genius who was also a son of Death.

Thomson was an essayist and a critic as well as a poet. Nothing but adverse fate hindered him from being a most charming essayist. All the qualities of the best essayists he possessed. To write well, however, the essayist should be able to write at his ease, and to take a kindly view of men and things. For what, in lack of sunshine, Thomson did as an essayist let us be grateful, regretting that one who had such various and abounding capabilities was always overshadowed by the presence or the presentiment of despair.

As a critic Thomson had few equals; to the Greek sense of symmetry and moderation he joined richer sympathies than those flowing from the Hellenic life. A true critic should be catholic and creative; and catholic and creative not many, except the great German critics, have been. The true critic should be free from preferences and prejudices; whereby it does not follow that he should be destitute of geniality. Far from it; geniality always makes better what is good. Nearly all English criticism in these days tends towards monstrous exaggeration and ridiculous hero-worship; but in general it is as unjust in its blame as it is extravagant

* Shelley: A Poem; with other Writings Relating to Shelley. By the late James Thomson (B. V.). To which is added an Essay on the Poems of William Blake, by the same Author. (Printed for private circulation by Charles Whittingham & Co. at the Chiswick Press.) 1884.

in its praise. This sort of thing was made fashionable by Macaulay, who can scarcely be called a critic at all, if perfect fairness is deemed indispensable. Compare, for instance, Macaulay's furious assault on Bacon with the profound, the merciful, the just estimate by Kuno Fischer in his admirable work on a man whose moral nature did not climb to a throne beside the throne of his imperial intellect, but who was far from being so base, so bad, as Pope the malignant and Macaulay the rhetorical would have us believe. Carlyle called Macaulay's talk a Niagara of commonplace. And Macaulay's writings deserve not, on the whole, a more flattering name. But, to diversify commonplace, declamation and paradox are needful; and of these Macaulay made very lavish use. Herein his imitators, the follicularians, follow him. They, however, do what he certainly did not: they affect omniscience. Without being a man of profound erudition, Macaulay had read enormously, and he had a most retentive memory. So that with whatever he spoke of he had an acquaintance more or less intimate. But his disciples, furnished, armed, with chaotic scraps of superficial information, would have the credulous reader believe that they know all things and a few others. Their mind is a marine store; but they boast to the universe that it is a museum of art. If they make, as they continually make, the grossest blunders, not many can detect these; and whoso detects them simply laughs and passes on. Pretentious sciolism, ludicrous exaggeration, imbecile hero-worship—such are the characteristics of the criticism by which the English mind is influenced and guided. That there is also criticism of a higher order it would be unfair to deny; but it has little sway in the English literary commonwealth.

From all the faults of the ordinary English critic James Thomson was free, one excepted. He was prone to exalt the hero into the demigod, the demigod into the god. This idolatry led, of course, to exclusiveness. If you wish to worship fitly the god whom you have chosen or created, you are compelled to raise round his temple a lofty wall to keep the temple sacred and to repel the intrusion of the vulgar.

This volume is mainly occupied with Shelley. It contains a poem on Shelley, very beautiful, but very vague; some

interesting notes and short essays on Shelley; and a correspondence between James Thomson and William Michael Rossetti, of which Shelley is the subject. There is also an essay, written in 1861, on the poems of William Blake, which, if not more weighty in thought, is more massive in style than any other production of James Thomson with which I am acquainted. Now, in days long gone by I was a warm admirer of Shelley, just as in days long gone by I was an enthusiastic adorer of Byron. But I gradually discovered that, if I were in everything else to have catholicity, married to earnestness, I must have it in my literary tastes and sympathies. It seems to me absurd, and, if not degrading, debilitating, that one man, however gifted, should be worshipped as the central sun of another man's existence. There are Carlyle Societies, Ruskin Clubs, and so on. I believe that, at a particular house in Hampstead, ladies and gentlemen congregate every Sunday to sing the praises and to interpret the writings of Robert Browning. Wherein does all this differ from the sectarianism of the conventicle? Why reprobate or ridicule the submission of the mediæval mind to Aristotle, yet prostrate the soul before a fashionable author? Carlyle was a good man, a perfervid thinker, a great pictorial writer; denounced hypocrisies, urged his brethren to be honest, true, and brave. Let us honour him; let us be grateful to him; but why exalt him into a deity? Ruskin is supposed to be an incomparable critic and interpreter of art; when, however, he leaves art he, for the most part, talks egregious nonsense. And just because he talks egregious nonsense has he so many fanatical adherents. If a man is eloquent on pictures, does it follow that he must be divinely inspired on every other subject? But it is on those subjects of which he knows least, or of which he is absolutely ignorant, that Ruskin is fondest of discoursing. And the more oracular he is on such subjects the more ready are silly women and sillier men to rush into idiotic Ruskinian fetichism. Browning's writings, with the exception of extracts in periodicals, I have not read. The extracts persuaded me that Browning is what may be called a conundrum poet; that he strives to be as obscure, as enigmatical, and as singular as possible. And doubtless, if all his rhymes are riddles, idle men and women may find amusement in guessing what they mean. But why should

the guessers elevate their childish occupation into a religion? Even if conundrum poetry were the most wonderful thing in the universe, has no one except Robert Browning written conundrum poetry? If you give your whole being to Robert Browning as the chief conundrum poet, how can you have time and mind for the immense range of poetical creation, from Sophocles down to Goethe, or for that overflow of universal life of which poetry is only one of the elements? No, my brothers and sisters; better than the idolatry of an individual, however inspired and illustrious, is it that each man and each woman should strive to be heroic and holy. By being heroic we best glorify heroes; by being holy we best adore saints.

In reference to certain authors, and especially to Shelley, James Thomson carried his worship to excess, and thus his vision was blinded. As man, Shelley was by no means faultless. As far as the facts are ascertainable, his treatment of his first wife must have been horribly heartless. When we contemplate Shelley's character and doings we feel as if we were in the presence of a Hellenic divinity. It was in the world, fresh and young and lovely, which Schiller has so grandly depicted in his "Gods of Greece," that Shelley lived. He was in perennial affinity with the elementary forces; he felt himself to be a portion of them. For nature he cared far more than for man. All human institutions, all human systems, and pre-eminently the English, he hated, because they warred with Nature. But when we speak of Nature it is our dream of Nature that we mean. Shelley dreamed himself into the Hellenic dream of the universe. The Hellenic life was too joyous to be spontaneously, abundingly compassionate. As a Hellenic divinity, entwined with, revealing, symbolising, the whole Hellenic life, Shelley could be, and in the case of his first wife was, coldly cruel. Thoroughly to appreciate Shelley, both as a man and as a poet, it is indispensable to have been steeped, as he himself was steeped, in the Hellenic nurture and culture. Consequently, though it is easy to rave and rhapsodise about him, few have had the training, even if they have the faculty, for estimating him impartially and yet genially. There was a richer, tenderer love in the heart of Byron than in the heart of Shelley. Byron had intense individuality. It was man as man that interested and was dear to him.

Nature he passionately adored; but in no further and in no other fashion than Nature shaped human destiny. Even his very misanthropy proved his opulence of affection; for from Timon downwards misanthropy has always and only been a great, glowing, generous love, soured or embittered. If Shelley was a Hellenic divinity, Byron was a Scandinavian Viking, with a Viking's wild plenitude of force and his magnanimous impulses. Now, no poet has ever become a catholic poet to whom, even if Nature was much, man was not far more. Suppose we take Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare as the three primordial catholic poets of all times, how overwhelmingly predominant in their productions is the human interest! Dante scarcely glances at Nature at all; his chief poem is the epic of sorrow and of sin. The worshippers of Shelley, James Thomson included, tell us that a magnificent development, miraculous victories, awaited Shelley if Death, the most jealous, the most envious, of the gods, yet also the most merciful, had not rushed in. This is questionable. The sublime saying in the Fragments of Menander, that whom the gods love dieth young, has to Shelley a special application. All men should die young who, as idealists, dream of an impossible perfection for themselves and mankind, or whose central existence is passionate identification with the eternal youth of the natural world. Without the feeling of identity with that eternal youth Shelley would have been wretched as a man and impotent and erratic as a poet. It was well for Shelley, therefore, that he died young, with the lustre of Nature's eternal youth on his brow and the rapture of Nature's eternal fire in his heart. The Hebe of Spiritual and unseen beauty that Shelley, rushing, flying through the glories of Nature, had longed to clasp, kissed Shelley to sleep. Mourn not, therefore, ye who love Shelley, that he vanished from the earth ere the noon of his life and his renown shone; rather rejoice. He had in the Mediterranean waves Nature's benison and Hellenic consecration.

If, in the case of Shelley, we can pardon, and even to a large extent sympathise with, James Thomson's idolatry, this idolatry is far from intelligible and justifiable in other instances and directions, and can only be explained and excused by the supposition that certain books and authors had made a deep impression on him when he was young.

Emerson extravagantly lauded Garth Wilkinson's book on "The Human Body," and James Thomson went still further in laudation, as if Wilkinson were a second Bacon. A really, a nobly-gifted man like Wilkinson suffers from such preposterous praise.

There is a strange misuse of language in James Thomson's employment of the words *mystic* and *mysticism*. When Emerson published his work on "Representative Men," in which we have "Swedenborg the Mystic," I took considerable pains to demonstrate that, of all men, Swedenborg was the least of a mystic; that he was a primordial visionary, and that the mystic and the visionary, so far from having anything in common, are flagrant contrasts to each other. The mystic rejoices in the mysterious, adores it for its own sake: where the veil is dark and deep he would make it still darker and deeper. On the contrary, for the visionary there are no veils: the separating wall between the visible and the invisible is broken down. To his phantasy, to his whole soul, these have become one. To Swedenborg the unseen world, instead of being less, was almost more a reality than the seen. I made an extensive excursion into the Swedenborgian wilderness at one time, but found few fountains of divine water, few refreshing fruits. Between thirty and forty years ago I held frequent converse with Swedenborgians, and found them, on the whole, though worthy people, as dreary as Swedenborg's books. Swedenborgianism is not a quackery like Spiritism; but it is no less dull. In any case, intelligent Swedenborgians have confessed to me that the distinction I drew between the mystic and the visionary is substantial, accurate, and true; that Swedenborg himself conceived his celestial apostleship to be a fuller, a richer, a grander revelation of God's mysteries; and that Emerson and others, by calling Swedenborg a mystic, prove how little they know of Swedenborg's writings, of his doctrine, and of his mission.

If James Thomson is mistaken in calling Swedenborg a mystic, he is still more mistaken in naming Jesus of Nazareth "one of the sublimest mystics." There is more here than the misuse of terms; there is a glaring defiance of facts. Mysteries are repugnant to the clear glance, the simple, direct, rapid perception, the ardent, impetuous imagination of the whole Semitic race. To the Hebrews

dreams, visions, miracles are familiar; but not even Jehovah, their God, was a mystery to them: he was a worker of wonders. From Egypt the Hebrews had brought the love of symbolism, and the love was nourished, enlivened, enriched, by the Babylonian exile. Even contact with Greek thought, and through that with profoundest Oriental philosophies, did not affect the simplicity of the Jewish creed, or dispose the Jewish mind more to mystical contemplations. Now, Jesus was not more inclined to mystical emotions and contemplations than his countrymen in general. To him dreams, visions, miracles were what they had been to all the prophets who had gone before him. Through a haze of myth we seize the history of Jesus in the first three Gospels. To idealise Jesus cannot be condemned; but to modernise, to liberalise him is a different thing. He was enthralled by all the superstitions of his countrymen. Habitually he is spoken of as the founder of a religion. But the idea, the intention, of founding a religion never flashed on his soul. He was unlike his countrymen in nothing but his celestial lovingkindness. Assuredly the mystical held no empire over him, influenced none of his actions. Doubtless the Gospel of John is fragrant with the holiest mysticism. And Jesus is incomparably more interesting in this Gospel than in the other three. There are portions of this Gospel, especially the seventeenth chapter, which I have read a thousand times. But cold, disenchanting, cruel criticism comes to assure me that we have here the idealised Christ, not the historical Jesus; a Christ idealised by the subtle and soaring Neoplatonic brain towards the close of the second century. Though my intelligence is compelled to accept what criticism reveals, my heart, my phantasy, are not equally obedient. Till my dying hour it is the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel whom I shall continue to love best, continue to enshrine in the Holy of Holies of my breast.

After the Gospel of John the dreams, the visions, the miracles of the peculiarly Jewish kind resume in the New Testament their ancient sway, proving that the Gospel of John and its mystical Jesus are both anachronisms. Peter has his visions; the martyr Stephen has his visions; and Paul has that grand and famous vision which leads to his conversion, and respecting the nature of which there has

been such heated disputation. In his Epistles Paul alludes to his visions, and he speaks of being caught up to the third heaven; but whether in the body or out of the body he does not know and cannot tell. Yet some may think that the last book in the New Testament is a mystical book. It has no claim, however, to be so characterised. There is in it symbolism of a very fantastic, sometimes very chaotic kind; but no mysticism. With the exception, then, of the Gospel of John, which is as remote from Hebrew thought, from Jewish feeling, as the utterances of Plotinus, not the faintest trace of the mystical is discernible either in the Old Testament or the New. But vision, in all its various significances, is supreme, is predominant. As what is called the supernatural is always a development of the natural, we can easily understand why the sight of the Semitic eye became so sharp and powerful, why the vision of the Semitic phantasy was so miraculously keen. The bright air of the desert, the angular outlines of the mountains and of every object, the perils of the nomadic life from men, from beast, from the sudden tempest, cultivated sight in a marvellous manner. And all intellectual and moral progress was but sight of a higher order. The prophet is the seer. Sight begat foresight, but not insight, not intuition. Men looked up from the desert to the heavens; had conversations with the angels, and also with God; adored the stars because they seemed the eyes of the sky; but never got beyond what the eye either in its ordinary or its ecstatic state revealed. Hence, though there is great elevation in the Bible, there is no depth, the solitary Gospel of John excepted, with whose appearance the reign of mysticism in the Christian Church began.

To give Emerson a place among the mystics seems almost as absurd as to assign Swedenborg a throne in the midst of that glorious company. Yet James Thomson says that Emerson's verses, as well as his lectures, are little else than the expression of mystical simplicity; and that, if he had been gifted with the singing voice, the world would not have had to look to the future for its supreme bard! Now, Emerson was a laborious manufacturer of phrases, and had as little of spontaneous inspiration as any one who ever wrote. That he committed the monstrous blunder of calling Swedenborg a mystic conclusively shows that there was

nothing of the mystic in himself. But art thou not jesting, James Thomson, when thou venturest to declare that Emerson, who was as cool, cautious, and calculating as any of his countrymen, would have been the world's supreme bard but for his lack of music? Not only had Emerson a narrow escape from being the greatest of all poets, but he is our modern Plato! Indeed, it seems that actually, or potentially, Emerson was the one consummate genius of all ages!

Enough, however, of condemnation, though there is room for much more. As an honest critic, James Thomson would not have complained of being honestly criticised. He loved truth, and he never flattered; and, if I were to flatter, I should wrong and insult him.

Some of Thomson's best productions as a critic are not in this volume, but in "Cope's Tobacco Plant," and I should have been glad if they had been here reproduced.

Nothing manifests more triumphantly the natural sweetness of Thomson's temper, the natural nobleness of his character, than that, as a critic, he never allowed any low motives, any petty spites, any jealousies, envies, to influence him. If he exaggerates, it is in the direction of eulogy, never in that of depreciation. It is easy for the fortunate to be generous; but it is not easy for the unfortunate to be just. Here is the test of true magnanimity. The magnanimity James Thomson possessed; but he never boasted of it. Consider also that while the most sunless poverty, the most bitter pain, were his evermore, evermore also, as I have more than once shown, the gloomiest hypochondriasis was maddening him. What hypochondriasis is, its misery, its insanity, I myself know too well. Its heaviest curse is that it makes our diseased phantasy the sole guide of our conduct, and, especially if we live a lonely life, transfigures all men, and even our best friends, into possible traitors, possible foes. Hypochondriasis is a form of madness, and one of the most dangerous forms to the individual himself, who is the sufferer. He feels as if he had been born merely to be tormented, and as if all the forces of nature were conspiring to mock, to wound, and to crush him. The temptation which haunts him most is the longing by suicide to put an end to his wretchedness. He lingers on, not from love of life, but from the love of child, or wife, or friend,

and from the dream that all the brave have dreamed of man's salvation. Now, except that by instinctive fascination James Thomson gained friends, he had scarcely any solace, giving him strength to bear his manifold tribulations. Yet, notwithstanding all his trials and sorrows, James Thomson could be sublimely just, could hinder his morbid moods from affecting his judgments. It was hypochondriasis, not the inability to bear real troubles, which impelled James Thomson to take into his feverish hand the drunkard's cup. But even the drunkard's madness, added to the madness of hypochondriasis and the cynicism of despair, never made him disloyal to divinest justice. And truly it is in divinest justice that the other divinest virtues must be rooted. Seldom are charities and chivalries, which do not spring from justice, aught but sentimentalities or hypocrisies. Therefore, there is more to be revered in James Thomson than the man of singular genius, than the tenderly loving heart, than the brother of the ideal Prometheus, than the brother of the ideal Christ. We, also, enchanted and emboldened, behold his valiant and effulgent countenance as he waves the banner of divinest justice on high. The truly godlike men the world never knows. But, dazzled by fulminating exploits, it exalts one of its idols and calls him great. James Thomson was not a great man; he was more, much more; he was a godlike man, godlike in his plenitude of pangs, godlike in his hushed and holy heroism, godlike in his inappeasable hunger for the bread of life, which, in the sacramental feasts of Nirvana, has, at last, been set before him. Would that I, thine elder brother, were beside thee, James Thomson, and beside all who uttered when dying the sublime Italian saying, That better than every victory is a beautiful suffering. But I cry Hail! and not Farewell! for I must soon depart from a scene where my doom has been more hapless even than thine.

So closes the third of my funeral orations, the third part of what I may call "A Nirvana Trilogy;" which trilogy, however, though referring mainly to the past, may be the prophecy of Nirvanaism as a new religion.

January, 1885.

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